

# HISTORY OF FORT JEFFERSON

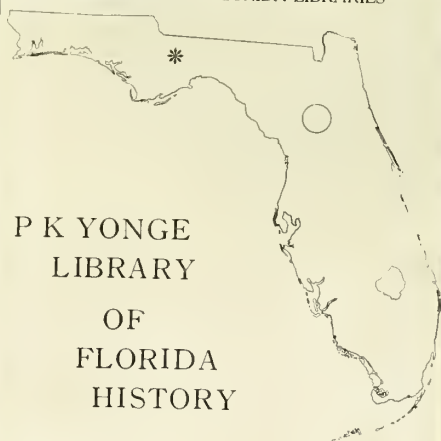
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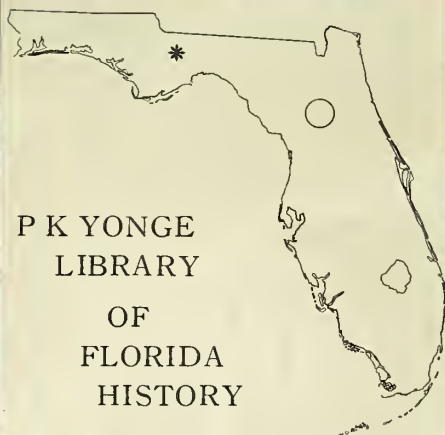


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SUMMARY OF FORT JEFFERSON

VICINITY HISTORY

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1513 to 1938

Fort Jefferson is an impressive hexagonal shaped structure, fully bastioned, with great walls 425 feet long, rising 60 feet from a surrounding moat. It is located about 70 miles due west of Key West, Florida, on Garden Key of the Dry Tortugas Islands.

The story of Fort Jefferson is a continuation of the romance of Tortugas that is recorded during the time of Ponce de Leon. That early explorer on his famous voyage in the year 1513, twice visited a group of islands on the tip of the peninsula to the West Coast of Florida, and later retracing his course, he landed calling the islands Las Tortugas, (sp. tortoise) because there he captured 160 tortoise.

In 1566 Pedro Menendez de Aviles explored the Tortugas, attempting to find passage between the Florida Keys for the great treasure ships of New Spain, and a few years later there was built a Spanish fortification called San Anton that seems to have survived through the early part of the 17th century. For three centuries after Ponce de Leon's discovery, Dry Tortugas were traditionally little more than a pirate's nest not stamped out until Porter's naval expeditions in the 1820's.

With the rest of Florida, the Tortugas were ceded to the United States in 1819 and by 1825 a lighthouse had been erected on Garden Key. In later years the strategic location of the



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of the Tortugas group became apparent, and Fort Jefferson was planned as the key to American defense in the Gulf of Mexico.

Great Britain objected to the fortification of Tortugas contending that the United States wished to seize Texas and that the freedom of Mexico would be lost if the American government was allowed to proceed further. Never the less in an 1842 report of the Secretary of the Navy it was stated: "The mouth of the Mississippi, so far as commerce is concerned, is not at Balize but it is the narrow pass between Cuba and Florida. Trade winds and Gulf Stream setting in from the east to west forbid the passage of vessels on the south side of Cuba; they are under the necessity of following the course of that stream and passing into the Atlantic through the Gulf of Florida. Hence the entire trade of the Mississippi and its tributary rivers -- is at the mercy of whatever power may happen to command the outlet of the Gulf of Mexico." Further investigation of potentialities led to the reservation of the key for military purposes, December 17, 1845. Actual plans for fortification there were soon completed.

#### 1846 - 1861

To Lieutenant Horatio G. Wright, United States Engineer Corps, was given the task of constructing the mammoth six-sided, three-tiered, casemated fortification that in 1850, was named Fort Jefferson. Wright reached Tortugas in December, 1846 and bent his efforts towards construction of temporary wooden buildings for his workmen. The Engineer Department had made contracts



with private companies for the construction of these buildings and a delay in fulfilling these contracts was the first intimation Wright had of the enormous obstacles confronting him on these isolated keys.

Almost from the beginning of construction, the engineers encountered an insidious enemy in the form of settling foundations. The original plan of foundation, poured concrete two feet thick and fourteen feet wide, was changed in certain areas to a grillage type. This consisted of a grid-like base which was hoped to prevent settlement, but the fort apparently continued to sink deeper and deeper into the soft earth in spite of efforts of the engineers.

Materials for construction were another source of worry. In the initial stage of construction, practically all material was shipped from northern ports, but with the discovery that northern brick soon deteriorated in the tropical climate, contracts were closed with Gulf Coast firms who supplied brick until the beginning of the Civil War. Aside from lumber and brick, however, other construction supplies had to be brought from northern markets and were exposed to possible loss or delay incident to a long and hazardous voyage.

There were other innumerable hardships confronting the engineers. The food was scanty and so poor that the workmen came down with scurvy; money and cargoes were lost in shipwrecks; workmen were hard to get, few men being willing to labor for long in the enervating tropical climate. Until the emancipation proclamation in 1863, negro slaves from Key West and St. Augustine comprised



the majority of the laborers --- but slave escapes were not uncommon.

The first slave break is recorded on July 10, 1847 when it was discovered that seven negroes had gone. The fugitives had destroyed or taken with them all craft which might be used by their pursuers, except an old unseaworthy boat which lay half-sunken in the harbor. This was hastily patched and launched, but when it had approached within a few miles of the schooner the negroes had commandeered, the fugitives cut down the masts of the ship and renewed their flight in a small boat the pursuing barge could not overtake. The slaves were soon picked up by a passing ship and placed in arrest at Key West. This quick recapture showed the owners of the slaves that their property was safe on the Tortugas and from then on it became more easy for the government to lease negroes.

In spite of these alarms and excursions the work on the fort progressed steadily and by 1848 the temporary buildings were completed and the 69 foot brick section of the officer's quarters was partially constructed. This was three stories high with three detached kitchens. In the same year construction of the moat wall was started, but it was not until 1851 that the main part of the fortification was begun.

Nature, itself, stood against man's encroachment throughout the history of Fort Jefferson. Even before construction was started, a hurricane so changed the contour of Garden Key that the



1846 topographical survey was of little value; another gale of major proportions struck in 1850. During October of that same year, fever ran its course through the entire force, taking<sup>5</sup> one life. In 1854 the fever reappeared, infecting almost every person within the fort. Only one death occurred, and strangely enough, not a single case was in evidence outside the walls, although nearly one hundred unacclimated persons were<sup>6</sup> quartered there. The hurricane struck again in 1856 wrecking the service of the ship Activa and fire destroyed a storehouse the following year. Fort Jefferson soon acquired the evil reputation which time has only fixed more firmly upon this gloomy citadel.

#### 1861-1865

Although work on the fort started in 1846 it had progressed so slowly that at the outbreak of the Civil War it was scarcely defensible. Until 1861, work on Fort Jefferson had consisted only of construction. The curtains and casemates of the fort had been carried to the height of the second tier arches but no armament had been placed. Captain M. C. Meigs was in command of the engineer contingent and had brought the work forward to the point where the lower tier casemates could be armed, but the second tier casemates were far from finished. There were no quarters within the parade ready for occupation with the<sup>5</sup> exception of the 69 foot off the officers section.

With the Civil War impending, however, both Army and Navy Departments of the United States hastened to make Fort Jefferson



defensible. Major L. G. Arnold was ordered to embark with four commissioned officers and sixty-two enlisted men on an errand of great secrecy. It was only after their ship was on the high seas and their sealed orders were opened that the destination of the detachment was known. In these orders, signed by Abraham Lincoln, Arnold was commanded to garrison Fort Jefferson and put it in a state of defense.

Arnold's early arrival is said to have kept Fort Jefferson from capitulating to the State of Florida. It is also said that seizure of Fort Jefferson by the Confederates would have meant recognition of the Confederacy, as the United States Navy would have been cut off from the Gulf of Mexico and the mouth of the Mississippi.

When Major Arnold arrived at Dry Tortugas, January 19, 1861 he found anything but a fort at hand. He had not yet time to obtain guns from Fort Taylor at Key West and there was not a single heavy gun at the fort mounted and ready for service. Undismayed, however, Major Arnold unloaded his steamer, and obtained and mounted six 8-inch columbiads and six field pieces.<sup>7</sup> Then he set the men to work on construction of gun carriages from some old timber found at the fort. On these he hoped to mount a few old casemate howitzers he had found lying on the parade ground.

The Major had started his labors not a day too soon for on the afternoon that he was superintending the working of his first



gun carriage, an armed schooner appeared off the fort, sent a messenger ashore, and demanded the surrender of the fortification to the State of Florida. The message came in by the officer of the guard, since, of course, its carrier was not allowed to enter the fort. Major Arnold being informed of the man's message, rushed to the embrasure nearest the postern and shouted, "Tell your captain I will blow his ship out of the water if he is not gone from here in ten minutes. Think I will fire anyway!" The bluff worked and the schooner was soon blending with the horizon.

During the Civil War the appropriations for fortifications within the seceded states were transferred to Fort Jefferson and occasioned construction on a grand scale. The casemates, curtains, and terreplein were completed probably to the point evident today. The parade magazine, the hot shot oven, the soldiers' barracks on the east and west sides of the parade, and the remainder of the 300 foot officer's quarters were started. More armament was added bringing the total in 1863 to 84 guns. In later years additional guns were mounted, and a supplementary battery was built on Bird Key.

All through the war the engineer force, constantly working towards completion of the fortification, experienced a great deal of trouble with the negroes employed as laborers. Union troops stationed at Jefferson accepted the negroes as equals, sleeping with them and inciting them to rebellion, while the civilian overseers whipped the negroes unmercifully with the permission of the owners. The intramural strife was



augmented by the advent of civilian engineers at a time when Engineer Corps men were employed in the more active part of the war theatre. Evidently it was customary for engineer force and garrison to squabble among themselves as they chose, but both departments united against the unfortunate civilians.<sup>5</sup>

Over all these quarreling cliques Major Arnold kept a gentle but firm hand. He was a stern disciplinarian yet endeared himself to the garrison by his democracy and the justice of his judgements. The garrison grew larger with the progress of the war and it was with difficulty that Major Arnold kept them within the bounds of discipline. One group in particular, two companies of Wilson's Zouaves, were tough customers who had never been subordinate to anyone. Major Arnold took their gaudy uniforms away from them, had them dressed in the regulation blue, and so handled them that within a few months he had tamed the Zouaves into a body of docile and well trained men. During Civil War days Major Arnold was often termed "The Maker of Fort Jefferson".

Union forces continued to hold Fort Jefferson during the war and it played an important part in the blockade of the Confederacy and as a naval base for United States warships. The fort was also used as a hospital and a Federal military prison. In 1864 about 1,000 men were confined there.



1865 -- 1875

The year 1865 marks the beginning of the most tragic and heroic era in Fort Jefferson history. It was not a constructive year. The little engineer force, although augmented by prison labor, was able to make no appreciable progress and the hurricane of October kept them busy repairing storm damage. The year was marked by continuous garrison changes and negro troops made up the majority of the force. Injustice, cruelty, and disease provided incentives for daring escapes.

After the close of the war the fort received considerable public attention because the alleged confederates of John Wilkes Booth in the assassination of President Lincoln were imprisoned there. Among these was Dr. Samuel A. Mudd, a Marylander, who had set the broken leg of the fleeing assassin. Dr. Mudd's case attracted particular attention, for it was widely believed that he was not a party to the conspiracy but had merely performed his professional duty. His act of setting Booth's leg, however, was sufficient to bring about a sentence of life imprisonment.

According to Mudd's story, escapes from this Devil's Island of America were by no means unusual and he was finally tempted to gain his own freedom, or at least reach territory where his lawyer's writ of Habeas Corpus might be obeyed. Accordingly on September 25, 1865, he slipped out of the fort to the wharf where lay the U. S. S. Thomas A. Scott, a transport ship, and with the help of one of the crew hid himself under some lumber in the



ship's hold. But he had been recognized before he reached his hideout and was soon clapped into irons. Henry Kelly, a seaman who had promised to aid Mudd, was also arrested and placed in close confinement. Mudd's captors so rejoiced at finding him that they did not look much farther and the boat remained the avenue of escape for six other prisoners.

Five nights later, Kelly and his cell-mate, a notorious thief named Smith, broke through the grated window, and lowered themselves to the ground with their chains. They made their escape in a small boat, taking with them money and supplies stolen from the post sutler. During the next month, three more prisoners escaped in broad daylight by taking a boat from under the eyes of the guard. Before the loss was discovered the fugitives were three leagues from the fort, and no attempt was made to pursue them.

The incentive for these daring escapes was supplied by many instances of downright cruelty. In April, 1866, one of Mudd's friends Colonel St. <sup>Grenfel</sup>eger/appealed to the post doctor for medical attention but was refused and ordered to go back to work. Grenfel refused to submit; ordered to carry a ball, he would not, and rope bonds could not break his spirit. The enraged guards then took the sixty year old man to one of the wharves and ducked him with a fifty pound weight tied to his feet. Another atrocity occurred in July when one of the prisoners, intoxicated and unruly, was killed by a sentry. Instead of punishing the soldier, the commanding officer commended him for his act.



And so the time dragged by in this Devil's Island of the Gulf. In the summer of 1867, some six companies of field artillery formed the garrison of the fort, and there was a small engineer force also. The prison quarters held about forty-five, including of course, Mudd and the other state prisoners. Throughout the summer the health of the post was satisfactory but there were the usual complaints of the offensive odors of the moat which was not excavated to full depth. At low tide its bottom was exposed to the sun and there rose a stench, probably intensified by the fact that the sewer emptied into the ditch and depended for flushing entirely on insufficient rise and fall of tide.

In spite of this unsanitary situation, the garrison kept surprisingly well until August 18, 1867. Then the whirlwind of pestilence swept over the lonely keys. Company K was first stricken with the disease - presumably Yellow Fever -- and case after case followed so rapidly that the company foarded up its quarters on the 22nd and moved to another casemate near Company L, rapidly extending right and left until it reached Company L and the prisoners.

At that time the post hospital occupied two rooms in the north end of the soldiers barracks, and another structure was soon set up on Sand Key as soon as the disease reached the epidemic stage



On the 5th of September, Joseph Sim Smith, Post Surgeon contracted the fever and died three days later leaving the fort without a medical officer. Dr. Mudd volunteered his services and worked alone until the 8th when old Doctor Whitehurst arrived from Key West to relieve him. Mudd was complimented highly for his professional skill and from then on had the liberty of the fort and the confidence of the garrison.

Efforts of both the doctors, however, failed to check the disease. On the morning of the 8th it was discovered that the fever had spread to Company I, quartered in the barracks opposite Companies K and L. Gradually the disease spread through the whole garrison.

The post hospital soon proved inadequate; Mudd refused to expose more patients to the Sand Key voyage, so on the 7th day of the month he had established a temporary hospital in the four first tier casemates under Company L. Hospital laundresses soon contracted the disease and carried it to their quarters on the west side of the fort. Then came the infection of the hospital nurses, some of whom had been on duty at Sand Key until the majority of patients in that hospital had succumbed. Soon the disease reached the officers' quarters carried there by the negro prisoners employed as servants.

The most remarkable spread of the disease, however, occurred on the night of September 16th in Company M which was quartered in the casemates just north of the hospital and Company L. It had seemed that <sup>M</sup> Company was to be immune, but that night between



the hours of eleven and one, nearly half the company were attacked with the most malignant form of the disease. During the next two nights the balance of the company, without exception, fell ill.

Dr. Edward Thomas no sooner arrived to take the place of the deceased Dr. Sim Smith, than he too, contracted the disease. He recovered however, under the care of Dr. Mudd, who himself fell sick on the 4th of October. The three months epidemic saw two hundred and seventy men stricken with the disease and a toll of thirty-eight deaths.

Mudd's work during the epidemic was highly praised by the garrison and a petition was made for his release. Major Valentine Stone, Commanding Officer, had told Mudd that he would exert his influence to secure a pardon for the imprisoned physician, but the Major contracted the fever enroute to Key West and died in that city. Evidently the petition was lost or ignored in Washington for after the epidemic Dr. Mudd was again confined, although there was an investigation of the disaster which resulted in no definite findings.

Public sympathy for the luckless physician became intensified however, as the story of Dr. Mudd's heroic service became known. March 8th, 1869, after an imprisonment of almost four years Dr. Mudd was released. Upon his return to Maryland he tried to regain his former practice as a country physician and in the course of his duties contracted pneumonia. He died on January 10, 1883 in the fiftieth year of his age; a martyr to the



profession that had repaid faithful service by imprisonment and disgrace.

Dr. Mudd's friend, Colonel Grenfel remained in the cells of Fort Jefferson until 1868, when he made his escape with three other military prisoners and an enlisted man. The escape was daringly conceived and brilliantly executed. Cannon commanding the avenue of escape had spikes driven in their touch-holes so that they could not be fired, but the men got safe away without raising an alarm.

For four years after the release of Dr. Mudd, Fort Jefferson seemed to have fulfilled its evil destiny and now lay tranquil. But this peace was soon shattered for in August 1873 the dread fever again ravaged the fort.

The Commandant, Lieutenant J. E. Bell, sent women, children, and some of the married men to Loggerhead Key at the first signs of the epidemic, and two days later most of the remainder of the garrison were evacuated to Loggerhead also. Only a sufficient number of volunteers to nurse the sick remained at the fort, and it is indicative of the high morale of the force that many more volunteered than were needed.

From the very beginning of the epidemic the situation was critical. The weather was intensely hot, the supply schooner was at Key West, and there was not a bit of ice to alleviate the suffering of the sick. When the boat arrived on the 30th of August, she



was immediately sent back to Key West for supplies, five nurses and a Dr. Otto arrived next day by the steamer "Northerner", to aid Doctors Porter and Gould already giving medical aid to the garrison. Both the doctors had served unremittingly, notwithstanding the fact that Porter had a sick child of his own and Dr. Gould had the added anxiety of seeing four of his children sick with fever at the same time.

Lieutenant Bell himself died on September 11th without leaving his post. Since for some time he had been the only officer at the fort, no doubt his duties and anxieties so lowered his vitality that he fell an easy victim. His evacuation of most of the garrison to Loggerhead Key seems to have showed good judgement for only three cases at Loggerhead were reported.

At least thirteen people died during the 1873 epidemic. To complicate matters, a severe hurricane struck Tortugas on October 6th causing such damage at Fort Jefferson that repairs were estimated at \$100,000. This second disaster, in connection with the recommendation that the fort be abandoned a year or two for thorough disinfection, led to the removal of the garrison in November 1873. In 1874, Fort Jefferson was formally abandoned as a military post, although troops continued to be stationed there temporarily,

1875 -- 1938

Lacking proper care, Fort Jefferson deteriorated rapidly in the tropical climate. The lighthouse service alone seemed to re-



tain interest at Garden Key, for a new light atop a stair tower replaced the old 1825 structure which had been reduced in classification to a harbor light about 1858.

In 1889 George Phillips, former chief overseer, was sent to inventory engineer property at Fort Jefferson; and while he and his men were engaged at work, a boat landed bringing <sup>a</sup> smallpox victim. The stretcher bearers wished to place the patient within the fort but the action was not permitted, so the sick man was established in the workmen's quarters on the southern end of the island. Phillips men were so frightened that they boarded the schooner, cast off, and could not be persuaded to resume work at the fort.

Fort <sup>10</sup> Jefferson was not occupied again by regular troops until 1898 when war with Spain seemed imminent. It was from Tortugas that the battleship Maine entered the port of Havana on January <sup>11</sup> 25, 1898. During the war a distilling plant was built on the south end of the key, but otherwise, little activity ensued.

<sup>9</sup>  
In 1902 the fort was transferred to the navy department which built coal rigs at the north and south ends of the island. Construction was hardly completed when a hurricane did serious <sup>10</sup> damage to the steel superstructure, and in 1906 the navy abandoned the old fortification, moving the distilling plant to the <sup>13</sup> naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba.



The fortification that in the days of wooden ships was to be the Gibraltar of the Gulf, and which cost an estimated total of \$2,335,000 was abandoned and quickly forgotten. Guns were removed, and much of the steel and lead was scrapped. For thirty years Fort Jefferson stood lonely and deserted save for an occasional fisherman and for the thousands of sea birds who came yearly to lay their eggs. Legends grew up around the ponderous structure --- there is a charming one about the grave that mysteriously receives fresh flowers from unknown hands --- but it is evident that the fort was hardly more than a rendezvous for fishermen and a scene of vandalism until 1934 when a salvage contract was made with a private company. The same year the fort received a detachment of World War veterans who again made the fort and Garden Key comparatively safe and habitable.

On January 4, 1935, the Dry Tortugas were designated Fort the Jefferson National Monument. Under the administration of National Park Service, the ancient debris is being cleared away, the casemates and curtains repaired, and the site made suitable for visitors. Besides its historic interest, Fort Jefferson is surrounded by a large wild life preserve and one of the richest marine gardens in the world where at least six hundred varieties of aquatic life are known to exist. If for nothing else than a comprehension of the enormous engineering task undertaken some hundred years ago when construction was accomplished by man power alone and when the lot of hundreds of men depended entirely upon the elements, one should see Fort Jefferson; he cannot but marvel at the bravery of these pioneers who dared to face untold hardships, tropical hurricanes, and devastating fevers to ensure the domain of the United States.



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